LaCocque, André

The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist


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The text of Gen 11:1–9 is short enough to be laid out elegantly in chiastic form as a one-page chapter on page 127 of LaCocque’s study. But what an extraordinary text it is, and what a tower of commentary and critique it has brought forth—reaching even to the very heavens. As the pivotal moment at which the book of Genesis swings from mythic history toward the specificity of the call of Abram, naming Babylon as it does so, it attracts massive interest from critics with historical concerns. It is a gem of a literary artwork, concise but beautifully sprung in its way with language, thus always available for close literary readings. But then it is also a story of human yearning on a cosmic scale and of being put in place in a world-defining divine response, to which the anthropologists will flock in their numbers. Then it is also a moment of phallic symbolism irresistible to the psychoanalytic concerns of others, all the while being a narrative of construction and deconstruction to which postmodernists of all stripes are invited. There can be few biblical scholars who could not find something resonant to say about Babel, from whichever angle they approach it across the plains of modern academic discourse.

What André LaCocque has done is basically gather together all these rubrics and take them one at a time in—one cannot resist the pun—a tour de force of sustained attention to this most fecund of texts. The book arrives as the third and final panel in his “triptych”
of studies of the work of the Yahwist in Gen 1–11, following on from accounts of Eden and of Cain and Abel. If ever evidence were needed that there are more searching ways of writing about stretches of biblical narrative than in the mode of straightforward commentary, LaCocque has certainly provided it. On this occasion especially he is able to show with ease that these early Genesis texts are patient of multiple layers of reading and rereading. Taken together, the trilogy that this book completes will stand as a major biblical-theological landmark in treatments of the Yahwist as a voice to be heard today.

The book begins with a lengthy prologue that effectively rehearses standard biblical studies criteria for reading Babel. There is much on J and P as they are interwoven through the primeval history. LaCocque suggests, rightly in my judgment, that the tale that we have is probably not capable of being peeled apart into earlier layers but is rather the singular work of one who is watching the ways of God and God’s people among the Babylonian ziggurats of the exile. Several reading lenses are paraded before the reader. The opening analysis grabs the reader with this well-observed comment: “At the level of imagination, no translation is necessary. The readership of the tale is immediately universal and timeless” (1). If there is a slight oddity about this prologue, it is that most of it makes better sense after one has wrestled with the text itself, which is delayed to the next chapter. Perhaps there was no obvious place to gather this kind of review of scholarship.

Part 1 of the book then pursues a range of approaches loosely gathered under the rubric of “construction.” A forty-four-page chapter pursues a twice-over reading of the text in detail: once with a view to lexical and grammatical detail, then again with what LaCocque calls “close reading.” This is a fine exercise of sustained attention to detail and will reward any student of the passage, being perhaps closest to the traditional mode of commentary that increasingly fades from view as the book progresses.

There follows a study of the work of J as myth. LaCocque is careful to explore what sorts of questions might be thrown into relief by this slippery term. Particularly helpful are his reflections on time as the enemy of myth: time is the obstacle to the work of the Babelians, he suggests, who are themselves trying to construct a timeless barrier to the experience of human existence. Evil, too, is opened up by the mythic account. It is parsed here as the fundamental human desire to be like God, “the human pretension to be autonomous” (84).

The next chapter offers a psychoanalytic approach. This reader must confess that here the range of concerns seemed to outstrip the textual resources available for reflecting on them. True, LaCocque offers his perspective as “only one ring of the textual ‘onion,’” (104), and he is content to suggest that none of what he says here need have been in the conscious mind of the Yahwist, but he does think it may (or must?) have been
subconsciously present. For example, to pick the example that seemed most illuminating, it is striking to the psychoanalytically minded reader that in this narrative of speech amidst reaching for the sky, the Babelians are conspicuously quiet as they go about their work: “Words are not center stage—the Babelians are oddly silent while building; technique is central” (97). The Yahwist was perhaps not making this point as such, but there it is for us to see as we ponder this myth among myths. Elsewhere it is a little more debatable whether the conclusion of the Babel story is really “an amazing precursor of modern astronomy” (101), and as for the reflections on “The Tower as Phallus” (118–20), these may be of interest to those for whom sentences such as “the tower of Babel is thrust up toward the sky and challenges God as impregnator” are more profound than simply bizarre.

Looming over the horizon, as we pass into the single chapter that makes up part 2, is Jacques Derrida, for whom Gen 11:1–9 was that rare thing, a biblical text that paraded the rupture of language between heaven and earth right on the surface of the text. And so we have “Deconstruction,” inevitably. Bakhtinian chronotopes jostle for space with Freud’s destructively present and absent mother of the child. We are in the territory of statements such as, “The divine violence in Gen 11:8–9 shatters the implicit violence of monoglossic ideology” (137–38), wherein the serious point seems to me to be lost beneath the uneasy co-opting of a heavily theorized vocabulary for talking about what language can (and does) do to people. Derrida, on the other hand, was a serious thinker who never seemed to be able to get over how much fun he could have dismantling social constructs. It is mildly exhausting trying to peel away the layers of the interpretive onion by this point, and LaCocque does not on the whole seem to be having as much fun as Derrida, so that the fizz is gone when we arrive at, “The Babel tower is a tower and is not what towers generally are; in that sense, it is not a tower, as the height of this one is in heaven” (153–54). So that’s “is and is not,” check. Without denying that there is much food for thought in this part 2, I could not escape the conclusion that the average reader who would benefit from it would be better off simply searching out Derrida’s original piece on the text (“Des Tours de Babel,” which the reader of LaCocque would not know was once in Semeia 54 [1991]: 3–34).

Genesis 11:1–9 is an endlessly fascinating text, and André LaCocque has written a probing and thoughtful book on it, which in part because it does cover so many angles of approach will not keep most readers happy all the way through. Nevertheless, his trilogy of studies of the Yahwist in Gen 1–11 succeeds admirably in showing how the ancient text still speaks, in myriad voices, today. One misses, in this case, some reflection of the interpretive trajectory followed by Christian readings of the Babel story. Ibn Ezra gets a page, along with the rabbis, and a fascinating page it is, hinting at the possibility that there is blessing in amongst the narrative’s judgment, which I have elsewhere argued may be an
angle worthy of much more exploration. But there’s the rub. A review that suggests that a monograph that possibly goes on too long in relation to its very short generating text, then wishes that more might have been said, is—like the book under review—living in the shadow of Babel. André LaCocque’s study is to be welcomed for shining several refractions of light through that shadow, which is not quite the same as describing how light might overcome the darkness.